

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 252 927

EA 017 414

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TITLE Overview of Research on Ability Grouping.
INSTITUTION San Mateo County Office of Education, Redwood City,
CA. SMERC Information Center.
PUB DATE Nov 84
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ability Grouping; Academic Achievement; Aspiration;
Class Organization; *Educational Discrimination;
Educationally Disadvantaged; *Educational Quality;
Educational Resources; Elementary Secondary
Education; English Instruction; Literature Reviews;
Peer Relationship; Self Esteem; Teacher Student
Relationship; Teaching Methods; *Track System
(Education)

ABSTRACT

Although over 77 percent of American school districts use ability grouping, or tracking, research overwhelmingly indicates that the practice benefits only the gifted. High schools commonly have two or three tracks. Regardless of the methods used to place students, the effects of ability grouping are uniform; furthermore, placement in low ability tracks is uniformly correlated with socioeconomic status and race, IQ or achievement test scores notwithstanding. Tracking, in general and in English courses, profoundly affects a student's education. First, low tracks receive both less and poorer instruction and emphasize different topics in English than high tracks; student satisfaction varies accordingly. Second, while tracking improves achievement scores of gifted students, it does not affect those of average students, and it lowers those of low ability students. Third, teachers behave more supportively toward higher-track students and hold low expectations for lower-track students. Fourth, tracking reinforces racial and class segregation and stereotyping. Fifth, low ability students may have less access to educational resources. Finally, students in low tracks have lower self-esteem and aspirations than do others. If schools are to provide equal educational opportunities, such effects must be carefully considered. (MCG)

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OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON ABILITY GROUPING

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Introduction

Ability grouping is also called tracking, skill grouping or homogeneous grouping. These terms are used interchangeably in the literature. There has been a great deal of research on this topic, going back as far as 1916.¹ This paper will discuss the research on ability grouping in general as well as in English instruction specifically. There has been little research on ability grouping in English, but the general research draws much the same conclusions as the research on English instruction.

Background

Ability grouping is defined as the selection of students for special instructional groups or classes based on differences in ability. Heterogeneous grouping is the term for classes in which students who may vary widely in ability are taught together. The practice of ability grouping in secondary education began around 1900. Before that time, few students progressed as far as high school, and those who did usually went on to college. Around the turn of the century the concepts of universal secondary education and the comprehensive high school were developed. This caused a great increase in the high school student population and created a

much more diverse group of students. Ability grouping or tracking was developed as a way of coping with this varied student population. Testing was used to separate students into ability groups; this practice was considered scientific and objective.² The rationale for tracking was that it would allow students to be taught at the level most appropriate to their abilities, and it would make the teacher's job easier by placing a more homogeneous group of students in the classroom. During the 1960s, concerns arose that ability grouping might be creating racial and socioeconomic segregation in the schools, and some educators and parents began to argue against tracking.³

Over 77% of all school districts in the United States practice tracking. Ability grouping starts as early as kindergarten, and students rarely switch to a different track after they reach third grade.⁴ Surveys show that most teachers and administrators support tracking and prefer it over alternative systems.⁵ However, the extensive research that has been conducted on tracking does not support its use and has led some experts to condemn it as an educational practice.

It is common for high schools to have at least two tracks. The two tracks are sometimes called "college bound" and "non-college bound." Schools with three tracks often label them "gifted," "average" and "remedial" or "low ability."

Student Placement

Schools use various methods for placing students into tracks. The most common methods include standardized academic testing, I.Q. testing, teacher recommendation and counselor recommendation.⁶ Other placement criteria sometimes used are grades, mental age, reading test scores and administrator recommendation. The research shows no significant difference in the effects of grouping with the use of various placement criteria.⁷

No matter what the method of selection, researchers find that placement in the low ability track is definitely correlated with low socioeconomic status and minority group membership. This is found to be true no matter what the I.Q. or the achievement test scores of the students may be. Even high achieving blacks tend to be placed in the low ability track, while even low achieving white middle class students tend to be placed in the higher track.⁸

Tracking affects many aspects of a student's education, including the quantity and quality of instruction he receives, his academic achievement, his interaction with teachers and other students, the educational resources that are made available to him, and his attitudes toward himself and school. I will summarize the research on each of these important areas.

Instruction

Researchers tell us that students in the low ability classes tend to receive a lower quantity and quality of instruction. Teachers spend less time with these students than with students in high track classes. Teachers assign less homework to low ability students.⁹ They use less imaginative and less effective teaching methods with low track students, depending mostly on drill. Teachers apparently think that ability grouping takes care of individual differences between students, so they tend to use large group instruction with the low ability classes, with little individualization. In English classes, researchers find that the topics of instruction differ between low and high track classes. Low track students are not encouraged to think at higher cognitive levels, nor are they taught thinking skills, as are high track students.¹⁰

In schools that have three tracks (advanced, average and low ability), the average classes are more like the advanced classes in terms of quality

and quantity of instruction. When teaching an average class, teachers do not tend to aim for the lowest common denominator. The content and teaching methods are more similar to those used in gifted classes than they are to those used in low ability classes. Students in regular or average classes are more satisfied with their education than are students in low ability classes.¹¹

Achievement

What are the learning outcomes of ability grouping? Gifted students learn more and score higher on achievement tests when they are placed in advanced classes.¹² This has been found to be true for English as well as other subjects that have been examined by researchers. Low ability students perform no better in their low ability track than they would in an average, or heterogeneous, class. One study dealing with English classes found that low ability students had higher achievement in regular English classes than in remedial English classes.¹³ Average students perform the same when they are in a heterogeneous class as when they are placed in a separate "average" track.¹⁴

The overall conclusion of the research on achievement is that tracking results in gains for the gifted, has no effect on the achievement of average students, and causes some achievement losses for low ability groups. Ability grouping actually increases the differences between the groups in their performance on standardized tests. Whether a student will go on to college and what college he will attend are best predicted by the track in which he is placed, not by his ability or aptitude.¹⁵

Interaction with Teachers and Fellow Students

The interaction between teachers and students varies among the ability group classes. Teachers tend to praise high track students more and to criticize them less than students in low ability groups. In high track

classes, teachers listen more to students, spend more time with them and are more friendly toward them.¹⁶ Teachers have lower expectations for low ability groups. Research shows that when teachers have low expectations for students, both the level of teaching and the level of learning are affected. Low teacher expectation is a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹⁷

Ability grouping also affects the interaction between students. Because placement in the low ability track is correlated with minority status and a low socioeconomic level, ability grouping tends to segregate students by race and class.¹⁸ Students who are separated into ability groups will rarely interact with other groups outside the classroom. They tend to stereotype students from other ability groups. The different ability groups do not learn to accept each other because grouping discourages them from getting to know one another.¹⁹

Access to Educational Resources

There is evidence that tracking prevents low ability students from equal access to educational resources. They receive fewer choices of courses and learning experiences. Low ability classes have access to fewer instructional materials than are available to advanced classes. Low track students tend to have less access to career guidance. In some schools, the less effective teachers are assigned to low ability classes.²⁰

Student Attitude and Self Concept

Ability grouping can also affect a student's attitudes toward himself and school. According to most researchers, being in the low ability track lowers the self esteem of students from minority or low socioeconomic groups.²¹ Students in the low track feel left out and feel that other students are unfriendly toward them. They perceive teachers as caring less about them and punishing them more than other students. They develop

negative academic self concepts, leading to low academic aspirations.²² However, one study dealing with English classes found that low ability students had about the same attitudes toward themselves and school whether they were in remedial or regular English classes.²³

Ability grouping has some positive effects on the self concepts of gifted students, but these effects have been described as "minor." When gifted students are separated in a particular subject such as English, they develop a better attitude toward that subject.²⁴ A study of a gifted English class showed that the students had better attitudes toward themselves, school in general, and the subject of English than when they were placed in a regular English class.²⁵

Effect on Average Students

The conclusion of the research is that low ability classes can be harmful to students and gifted classes can be beneficial, but placement in average or regular classes has little effect on average students.

Conclusion

Those in favor of ability grouping claim that homogeneous groups are easier to teach, and that students will learn more when taught at their own levels. Another advantage of ability grouping is that gifted students flourish in advanced classes, both academically and personally. The arguments against ability grouping state that it causes lower achievement levels, as well as social stigma and isolation, for those who are placed in the low ability group²⁶. Tracking may interfere with equal educational opportunity and the desegregation of our society.²⁷

Educational experts point out that grouping is one of the few aspects of our schools that can be changed. Educators have some measure of control over the grouping system they choose to use. That choice reflects the philosophy of the school district and the community. Decisions about

grouping should be made for the good of the students rather than solely for their impact on the jobs of teachers and administrators. If ability grouping is used, experts say that teachers should use special teaching methods to meet the needs of the low ability group. The overwhelming conclusion of the research is that ability grouping benefits only the gifted and can be devastating for those in the low ability group. If the goals of education are to maximize and develop each student's potential and to give every student equal educational opportunity, then the effects of ability grouping should be carefully considered.²⁸

NOTES

¹Chen-Lin C. Kulik and James A. Kulik, "Research Synthesis on Ability Grouping," Educational Leadership, May 1982, p. 619.

²Jeannie Dakes, A Question of Access: Tracking and Curriculum Differentiation in a National Sample of English and Math Classes (Los Angeles: University of California, 1981), ERIC Document ED 214 892, pp. 1-2.

³Robin D. Froman, "Ability Grouping: Why Do We Persist and Should We" (Paper presented at the 65th annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles, April 13-17, 1981), ERIC Document ED 200 617, p. 9.

⁴Howard J. Johnston and Glenn C. Markle, "What Research Says to the Practitioner about Ability Grouping," Middle School Journal, August 1983, p. 28.

⁵Wynona Winn and Alfred P. Wilson, "The Affect and Effect of Ability Grouping," Contemporary Education, Winter 1983, p. 119.

⁶Winn and Wilson, pp. 119-120.

⁷Froman, pp. 5-8, 10-13.

⁸Winn and Wilson, p. 120.

⁹Dakes, pp.186-188.

¹⁰Dakes, p. 186.

¹¹Dakes, pp. 195-200.

¹²Kulik and Kulik, p. 620; John Newfield and Virginia B. McElyea, "Achievement and Attitudinal Differences among Students in Regular, Remedial, and Advanced Classes," Journal of Experimental Education, Fall 1983, p. 51.

¹³Newfield and McElyea, p. 55.

¹⁴Kulik and Kulik, p. 621; Winn and Wilson, p. 121.

¹⁵Winn and Wilson, p. 121.

¹⁶Winn and Wilson, p. 120.

¹⁷Johnston and Markle, p. 28; Winn and Wilson, p. 122.

¹⁸Winn and Wilson, p. 122.

¹⁹Johnston and Markle, p. 29.

²⁰Winn and Wilson, pp. 120-121.

²¹Winn and Wilson, pp. 121-122.

²²Dakes, pp. 190-194.

²³Newfield and McElyea, p. 55.

²⁴Kulik and Kulik, p. 620.

²⁵Newfield and McElyea, p. 52.

²⁶Kulik and Kulik, p. 619.

²⁷Froman, pp. 19-20.

²⁸Froman, pp. 22-23.

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These and other resources on ability grouping are available from the SMERC Information Center at (415) 363-5450.

This paper is intended as an unbiased review of the literature and does not reflect positions or opinions of the San Mateo County Office of Education.

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